

## Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Hong Kong Monthly Meeting

### State of the Meeting Report 2020

(Based on a threshing meeting held on 26 February 2020, attended by 12 friends.)

Members and attenders of Hong Kong Monthly Meeting (HKMM) agreed to hold a threshing session on 26 February 2020 to consider the query: *What is the current state of our Meeting?* This report summarizes the reflections and aspirations shared during that session.

The current state of HKMM is based on both its past history and the future developments we anticipate sharing. As such, we begin by remembering with gratitude our distant past: sometime during the summer of 1952, a small group of Quakers started meeting at the home of the Anglican Bishop, whose wife was a Quaker. HKMM was first registered as a charitable Society in November, 1952. Early Hong Kong Friends were engaged in various types of meaningful social services, including work with the Friends Ambulance Service and later the popular Friends Walks. In particular, we acknowledge the good work of Mona and Gus Bourguese, who were among the first Hong Kong Friends and who assisted many Chinese refugees coming from the Mainland after 1949, some of whom attended HKMM. As numbers increased and the bishop changed, HKMM eventually moved into the spacious David Kwok Room in the Annex of St. John's Cathedral.

During the past two decades, HKMM experienced many ups and downs, largely due to a series of challenges that seemed at times to threaten the very viability of our continued existence as a Monthly Meeting—most notably, the accidental loss of our charitable status in 2003 and the closure of our bank account in 2014. With gratitude and a communal sense of relief, we were happy to have those matters resolved last September—as it happened, both within the same week. We now have charitable status with the IRD and an active account with Standard Chartered Bank!

The stability provided by HKMM's use of a meeting room at St. John's was disrupted in the summer of 2016, when the Cathedral informed us that we could no longer meet there on Sunday mornings. Rather than change our historical meeting time, we opted to meet elsewhere; members were able to find venues that could be used without charge. But the impermanence of these arrangements made our existence feel almost ephemeral at times. For the past couple of years we have been meeting in the library of the Religion and Philosophy Department of Hong Kong Baptist University, where a nearby room can also be used for children's activities. It has been a good arrangement, yet far from ideal, because the university is not centrally located and the room is difficult for newcomers to locate. Moreover, the overall atmosphere is not very welcoming and the academic environment tends to encourage conversation at an intellectual level that some who attend do not find interesting.

HKMM has always been a relatively small Meeting, but the ever-changing membership over the past two decades has tended to make it difficult for participants to preserve a deep and lasting sense of friendship. Interpersonal conflicts, which might not make a significant impact on a larger Meeting, can be a major setback to a small Meeting such as ours. While this situation may be almost inevitable, given that many who attend are from overseas or are in transitional situations for other reasons, a good way to address this problem would be to reach out to a broader base of locals and others who view Hong Kong as their permanent home.

Last year, with our current venue starting to feel a bit more stable, friends developed a greater sense of spiritual unity. For example, we arranged a First Day school; four children (currently aged between 5 and 11) attended most of the lessons. Three adults took turns teaching and for several months the parents of these children hired a helper who watched the children after the lesson. The children have all reported to their parents that they feel genuinely welcomed and cared for; they eagerly anticipate the sessions, and have enjoyed singing song during the first 10 to 20 minutes on many of the days recently, when there have not been formal First Day lessons.

The very fact that we have been able to meet and consider the current state of HKMM attests to the fact that our current situation is more stable than it has been for some years. We have set up a

committee to look for a new venue, as we all agree that the current venue is not a permanent solution to our long-term needs. Together, we look forward to channeling the energy that has been devoted for so many years to the seemingly irresolvable pragmatic issues relating to our legal and financial status into future-oriented spiritual issues, including organizing more fellowship and learning events to supplement Meeting for Worship as we search for a new venue to serve as HKMM's long-term home.

As we look optimistically toward a brighter future, how can we direct this residual energy to other, more fruitful ways of growing an even more stable Meeting? As we reflected together on this query, various suggestions and action points were raised. A key concern is the role played by the Afterthoughts time, immediately following Meeting for Worship. In the past, HKMM has not always had a time for Afterthoughts, as we do now, and when we did have Afterthoughts in the past, they were not always as intellectual or as politically oriented as they have often tended to be over the past two or three years. Aware that some who attend Meeting were feeling somewhat awkward about leaving if they preferred not to stay for the Afterthoughts, we have in recent months adopted the practice of taking a brief break (for refreshments, etc.) after the introductions and essential announcements that follow Rise of Meeting. This has helped, but more could be done.

In the past we periodically held extra gatherings, either midweek or on Sundays (sometimes before Meeting for Worship, but usually afterwards). These had a variety of formats, including outside speakers, learning sessions led by HKMM Friends, social events, music/singing, and sharing of spiritual pilgrimages. Together we look forward to organizing activities such as these in the coming weeks and months, hopefully on a regular basis. One option would be to have a regular rotation each month, whereby (for example) on the first week we hold a special session after Meeting for Worship (such as singing, learning on a pre-arranged topic, inviting an outside speaker, etc.), the third week we hold our Meeting for Business (as we have been doing regularly in recent years), and only on the *other* weeks each month we hold our usual Afterthoughts—except sharing of brief spiritual insights.

In order for this increase in HKMM activities to work well, Friends agreed that we must distribute the responsibility for organizing activities as widely as possible. Along these lines, Friends convey their thanks and appreciation to the Clerk for bringing us to our present state by completing several complex and often time-consuming background tasks. The Clerk has accepted a second three-year term, but does not want to serve in this role for more than a total of six years. It is therefore essential to have a broader base of Friends volunteering to organize these various new activities. In this way, the Clerk's role can become what it should always be: just a facilitator for the leadership of all.

How, then, can we make ourselves more welcoming as a Meeting? Those involved in searching for a new venue should keep this query at the forefront of their considerations. Having better refreshments and a longer time of informal fellowship after Meeting for Worship would also be helpful, so that Friends can reach out to welcome newcomers, instead of just subjecting them to our sometimes long-winded Afterthoughts. Although we are thankful to have had several newcomers join us recently, we are also aware that quite a few women have visited in recent years, shown an interest, but then never returned. Indeed, for most (though not all) of the past two decades, women have been under-represented in HKMM. We aspire to become a Meeting where all genders can feel fully welcome.

In the hope of being and becoming a society that expresses proximate love to those in our community, including people who are in various ways "other" from ourselves, we propose the following action items to be implemented during the coming months: (1) in March, a HKMM walk will be organized; (2) as our financial situation becomes more stable through more Friends giving to HKMM on a regular basis, we will consider purchasing a coffee maker and arranging better snacks after Meeting for Worship, so that everyone feels more welcome; (3) those of us who sometimes participate in local charitable events, such as homeless walks, Impact Hong Kong, or Feeding Hong Kong, will make an effort to notify Friends of our planned participation and, where possible, organize such outreach events especially for HKMM participants; and (4) when the virus threat is reduced and travel to the Mainland becomes feasible again, we will organize a HKMM-wide trip to Chong Qing, where Ruth Yang and her late father, Stephen Yang, were from and where there may still be a Quaker presence.